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'JFK': Paranoid History

Oliver Stone's movie "JFK" will give paranoia a bad name and give us all pause. Viewing his travesty about the Kennedy assassination makes one wonder what Stone would have thought about the century's most consequential assassination.

On June 28, 1914, six young men were poised in Sarajevo, Bosnia, to throw bombs at the car of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Five of them, intimidated by the crowds or unwilling to hurt the archduke's wife, did nothing. However, one asked a policeman which car was the archduke's, the policeman identified it, and the boy threw his bomb, which bounced off the archduke's car and exploded under the following car.

One of the others, Gavrilo Princip, went off disconsolately for coffee at a corner cafe, where he loitered. Later, the archduke, going to a museum, decided to visit the people injured by the bomb. His driver, confused about the route to the hospital, stopped in front of the cafe where the astonished Princip sat. Princip leapt up and shot the archduke and his wife, thereby lighting Europe's fuse.

Stone's portrayal of this would be: Like, wow. What a complex conspiracy brought the victim to the assassin's cleverly contrived coffee break. The driver was not confused, the first bomb "miss" was a ruse, the policeman was in on the plot, and there must have been hundreds of others, too. Who was behind it all? Well, who benefited? Munitions makers—merchants of death.

That is the message of Stone's celluloid diatribe. Much of America's establishment conspired to kill Kennedy because he loved peace and "they" wanted war. Strange that a society so sick allowed such a saint to be president at all, but this is cartoon history by Stone, who is 45 going on 8.

In his three-hour lie, Stone falsifies so much that he may be an intellectual sociopath, indifferent to truth. Or perhaps he is just another propagandist frozen in the 1960s like a fly in amber, combining moral arrogance with historical ignorance.

He is a specimen of 1960s arrested development, the result of the self-absorption encouraged by all the rubbish written about his generation being so unprecedentedly moral, idealistic, caring etc. He is one of those "activists" who have been so busy trying to make history they have not learned any.

Of America's two other assassinations of the 1960s—of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.—Stone says, "There's no doubt that these three killings are linked, and it worked. That's what's amazing. They pulled it off." Ah, yes: "They." Who are "they" who used Sirhan Sirhan and James Earl Ray as well as Lee Harvey Oswald for their purposes?

They are, he says, "a moving, fluid thing, a series of forces at play." Can he be a tad more specific? Okay. They are "a parallel covert government." They are merchants of death, omnipresent, omnipowerful—but unable to stop Stone from unmasking them. Amazing indeed.

History teaches that as a conspiracy increases in size arithmetically, the chances of its unraveling increase exponentially. Yet Stone asserts that a conspiracy of many thousands (involving the FBI, the CIA, the armed forces, the Secret Service, the Mafia, doctors, Earl Warren and the other members of his commission, the press and many others) succeeded until 28 years later, there came a hero: Stone.

Back in Stone's formative years—those 1960s he loves so ardently—members of the John Birch Society thought President Eisenhower had been a Communist. Intellectually, Stone is on all fours with his mirror images, the Birchers, who, like Stone, thought Earl Warren was a traitor. Stone and they are part of a long fringe tradition, the paranoid style in American politics, a style ravenous for conspiracy theories.

Why is actor Kevin Costner lending himself to this libel of America? Is he invincibly ignorant or just banally venal? Nothing else can explain his willingness to portray as a hero Jim Garrison, who, as New Orleans' district attorney, staged an assassination "investigation" that involved recklessness, cruelty, abuse of power, publicity mongering and dishonesty, all on a scale that strongly suggested lunacy leavened by cynicism.

After covering the assassination story for 28 years, the journalist who knows most about it is The Post's George Lardner. He documents Stone "stomping on presumptions of innocence, cooking up false admissions, ignoring contrary evidence and giving a conspiratorial tone to inconsequential facets of the tragedy that were explained long ago." Stone himself should have played Garrison.

Every viewer will have his or her favorite Stone fabrication. Mine is either the assertion that U.S. troops from Germany were airborne over America as part of the plot, or the assertion that President Johnson reversed a Kennedy order about Vietnam that in fact Johnson approved four days after the assassination, or the assertion that the CIA had stories about Oswald's arrest in some foreign papers almost at the moment he was arrested.

The through-the-looking-glass premise of this movie is: Proof of the vastness of the conspiracy is that no one can prove it exists. Stone's pose is that he loves America and the truth equally. That is true.

"JFK" is an act of execrable history and contemptible citizenship by a man of technical skill, scant education and negligible conscience.